

The “Work” of Archangel Raphael

IRENE NOWELL, ATCHISON, KS

In the book of Tobit the archangel Raphael introduces himself to young Tobiah as someone who has come to Nineveh to work (ἐργατεύεσθαι, Tob 5:5). So what is Raphael’s work? What does he do?

Our first clue concerning Raphael’s work comes from his commission. He is sent by God to heal Tobit’s blindness, to free Raguel’s daughter Sarah from the demon Asmodeus, and to arrange the marriage of Sarah and Tobit’s son Tobiah (3:17). At the end of the book, Tobiah reports that Raphael indeed cured his wife Sarah and his father Tobit and adds that he guided him safely on his journey and brought back the money Tobit had deposited in Media (12:2-3). Raphael himself adds that he presented the prayers of Tobit and Sarah before God, reported Tobit’s good deeds to God, and was sent to put Tobit to the test (12:12-14).¹

But does Raphael really do *all* these things? He is clearly a guide and protector. We must believe that he stands before God and presents the prayers of the faithful. But is he really a healer and a marriage broker? Not exactly. It is Tobiah who applies the fish gall to his father’s eyes and peels away the scales that blind him (11:11-13). It is Tobiah who takes over the marriage negotiations and insists that Raguel allow him to marry Sarah (7:9-11). Tobiah is the one who burns the fish’s liver and heart to drive Asmodeus away from Sarah (8:2-3). What is it that Raphael, whose name means “God heals,” really does and how does he do it?

The Angel as Messenger

Raphael’s primary work is the specific work of an angel. He is a messenger (*ἄγγελος* = “messenger”). He conveys messages from God to human beings and from human beings back to God. God has sent him,

¹ Francis de Sales identifies “the three good offices which the great angel Raphael fulfilled for his dear Tobias”: guiding, preserving from dangers, and consoling and strengthening in difficulties, Treatise chap. 21: “How Our Savior’s Loving Attractions Assist and Accompany Us to Faith and Charity,” downloaded 5/23/07 from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/desales/love.html>.

not to heal, but to teach Tobiah how to heal. Raphael also informs Tobiah that he must marry Raguel's daughter Sarah and he has all the information Tobiah needs (6:11-13). Once more it is clear that his role is that of messenger. He instructs Tobiah; but it is Tobiah who asks Raguel to allow him to marry Sarah. In these two examples, Raphael brings God's word to human beings, but his duties also include carrying messages from human beings to God. He informs Tobit and Tobiah that he was the one who presented the record of Tobit's and Sarah's prayers before God. He also presented to God the news of Tobit's good deeds (12:12). Finally, Raphael acts as messenger between human beings. After the wedding Tobiah sends him to Gabael to deliver the bond of deposit and collect the money Tobit left with him years ago (9:2). In addition, Raphael informs Gabael of Tobiah's wedding and invites him to the celebration (9:5). In his final speech, he returns to the role of messenger from God to human beings, informing Tobit and Tobiah of his identity and God's purpose and exhorting them to pray in thanksgiving (12:15-20).

The Angel as Medical Advisor

On the first night of their journey, Raphael instructs Tobiah to catch the fish that threatened to swallow his foot (6:2)² and to remove the gall, heart, and liver and keep them because they are useful as medicine (φάρμακον, G^{II} 6:4). When Tobiah asks for further information, Raphael informs him that the heart and liver will drive away evil spirits and the gall, applied to a blind person's eyes, will restore sight (6:7-9). The reader is immediately alerted to the correspondence between this fish medicine and the ailments of Tobit and Sarah, even though Tobiah seems unaware of the coincidence. Raphael must repeat and elaborate on his instructions for each healing.

When Tobiah is about to approach his blind father, Raphael refreshes his memory and adds details: Smear the gall on his eyes and peel off the scales (11:4, 7-8). Tobiah follows Raphael's instructions and Tobit is healed. Tobit suffers from a medical condition and Raphael's

² G^{II}, represented primarily by Sinaiticus, says that the fish wanted to swallow Tobias's foot (ἔβουλέτο καταπιεῖν τὸν πόδα τοῦ παιδαρίου); G^I, represented primarily by Vaticanus (B) and Alexandrinus (A), says that the fish wanted to swallow the boy (ἔβουληθη καταπιεῖν το παιδαριον). Aramaic 4Q197 agrees with G^{II} (בָּנֶן) as does the Old Latin (*circumplexus est pedes eius*). The Syriac version agrees with G^I as does the Vulgate (*ad devorandum eum*). For all Greek references, see Hanhart, *Tobit*; for the Aramaic and Old Latin, see Fitzmyer, *Tobit* 205.

recipe for the healing of his blindness reflects medical practice of the second century B.C.E. Ben Sira, whose book is contemporary with the book of Tobit, also recommends respect for the doctor and his medications (Sir 38:1-15; see φάρμακα in 38:4). The first-century B.C.E. book of Wisdom declares that “the creatures of the world are wholesome and there is not a destructive drug (φάρμακον) among them” (Wis 1:14).³

The medical knowledge of the period is affirmed, but the approval of medical means is not unconditional in the book of Tobit. Earlier Tobit had consulted doctors (ἰατρούς) who, according to G^{II}, applied medication (φάρμακα), which did not help but only worsened his condition (2:10). Now the φάρμακον that Raphael recommends is effective (11:11-13 G^{II}). This revelation of healing methods by an angel reflects the statement in *Jubilees*⁴ that God told one of the angels “to teach Noah” the means of healing “so that he might heal by means of herbs of the earth. And Noah wrote everything in a book just as we taught him according to every kind of healing” (*Jub.* 10.10, 12-13).⁵ The Jewish tradition in the second century B.C.E. seems to have affirmed natural means of healing, but with the caution that these means are revealed by God or God’s angel. As Schüngel-Straumann says, healings happen both through human knowledge and the power of God.⁶

The angel in *Jubilees* who says that “one of us” was commissioned to do this teaching is an “angel of the presence” (*Jub.* 2.1). Raphael identifies himself as “one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord” (Tob 12:15), thus, it would seem, an “angel of the presence.” A few of centuries later *1 Enoch* identifies Raphael as the one “who is set over all disease and every wound of the children of the people” (*1 Enoch* 40.9). In the book of Tobit Raphael is not himself the healer, but is the advisor and instructor to the human character, Tobiah, who will carry out the healing.⁷

3 See Schüngel-Straumann, *Tobit* 117-18; Stuckenbruck, Book 262-63.

4 A probable date for *Jubilees* is the mid-second century B.C.E.; the book of Tobit was written close to the same time, possibly just a few decades earlier.

5 See Stuckenbruck, Book 262. Stuckenbruck suggests the absence of the word φάρμακον in G^I reflects an ongoing conversation between the recensions reflecting “a mild hesitation to apply medico-magical language to a practice which it otherwise affirms” (p. 269).

6 Schüngel-Straumann, *Tobit* 151.

7 In the early Christian tradition Origen says that “a particular office is assigned to a particular angel: as to Raphael, the work of curing and healing; to Gabriel, the conduct of wars; to Michael, the duty of attending to prayers and supplications of mortals” (*De Principiis* 7: “On the Angels”).

The Angel as Guide and Protector

Raphael has come to work, and Tobiah meets him when he goes out to seek a guide to travel with him to Rages (5:4). Raphael identifies himself as the perfect guide and protector. He has been to Media often and knows all the roads, all its plains and even its mountains (5:6, 10 G^{II}). He even knows Gabael, the man who holds the money Tobiah is being sent to recover.

Raphael delivers what he promised: "I will go with him; have no fear. In good health (*ὑγιαίνω*) we shall leave you, and in good health we shall return to you, for the way is safe (5:17 G^{II}).⁸ He fulfills Tobit's prayer for Tobiah and his prediction to Anna: "A good angel will go with him; his journey will be successful, and he will come back in good health" (5:22; see 5:17). He guides Tobiah to Raguel's house in Ecbatana; he brings Tobiah and Sarah back safely to Tobit's house in Nineveh.

The trip is not without its dangers, but Raphael protects his young companion. Tobiah is threatened by a monster fish on the first night (6:3). Raphael, however, does not seize the fish; he orders Tobiah to do it himself: "Take hold of the fish and do not let it get away!" (6:4). Even here he functions as messenger and teacher. The second mortal danger is the demon Asmodeus, who has killed seven of Sarah's bridegrooms on the wedding night. Raguel assumes that Tobiah will be the eighth and digs his grave in advance (8:9-12). But Raphael has given Tobiah instruction regarding the expulsion of the demon afflicting Sarah. Again Tobiah, who is afraid to marry Sarah because of this demon, has forgotten that he already has the means (the fish's heart and liver) to banish it (6:14-15). Raphael, ever patient, reminds him of how to use the fish's innards. Tobiah remembers Raphael's words and acts on them when he enters the bedroom (8:2-3).

The use of foul odors as a means of exorcising demons was common in antiquity.⁹ This burning of the fish's innards is also identified as φάρμακον (6:7 G^{II}). Thus what seems to be a more "magical" than "medical" remedy is also recommended by the angel.¹⁰ The consequence of burning the fish's heart and liver, however, may be more specific than simply banishing the demon. Paul-Eugène Dion proposes that what Raphael has been sent to do is to "divorce" (*λῦσαι*) Asmodeus from

⁸ In the G^{II} reading of this verse Raphael twice uses the word *ὑγιαίνω*, which is significant for this book about healing. The word appears 25 times in G^{II}. The English translation used throughout is the *New American Bible*.

⁹ E.g., Josephus, *Ant.* viii 47; see Stuckenbruck, Book 263, and Schüngel-Straumann, *Tobit* 118.

¹⁰ See Stuckenbruck, Book 263.

Sarah (3:17 G^{II}).¹¹ Tobiah's comment in 6:15 (G^I) that the demon "loves her" (δαιμόνιον φιλεῖ αὐτήν) strengthens Dion's suggestion.

In addition to instructing and advising Tobiah regarding the demon, Raphael has his own part to play. He pursues the demon to Upper Egypt and there binds him hand and foot (συνεπόδισεν αὐτὸν ἐκεῖ καὶ ἐπέδησεν παραχρῆμα; 8:3 G^{II}). The binding of demons is common to the tradition about angels. In *1 Enoch* Raphael binds Azazel and throws him into the desert of Dудael (*1 Enoch* 10.4). In Revelation 20, Michael binds the "ancient serpent," the Devil (ἐδησεν αὐτὸν; Rev 20:2).¹²

The Angel as Marriage Broker

In the midst of these instructions about healing, Raphael also reminds Tobiah of his father's injunction to marry a woman of his own family (lit. "house," οἶκος, 6:16; cf. 4:12-13). He knows the woman who is just right for Tobiah: Sarah, daughter of Raguel and Edna (6:11-13)! Raphael insists that this marriage will take place the very night of their arrival in Ecbatana and lists several reasons. First of all, Tobiah is Sarah's closest relative and therefore, according to the custom of endogamy, has the right to marry her. Raguel cannot deny him this right. As the closest relative, Tobiah also has the right to inherit the property of Raguel. Sarah is a desirable bride: "sensible, brave, and very beautiful" (6:12). The most compelling argument is that Sarah was prepared for him before the world existed" (σοὶ αὐτῇ ἡτοιμασμένη ἦν ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰώνος; 6:18 G^I; compare G^{II}).¹³

Raphael has already suggested that Ecbatana, where Raguel lives, is the true goal of their journey. When Tobiah came seeking a guide to lead him to Rages in order to collect money that Tobit had deposited with Gabael, Raphael announced that Rages was only a two-day journey from Ecbatana (5:6). Raphael intends to speak to Raguel and arrange the marriage (6:13). In this case too, however, Tobiah will take the lead and himself conduct the marriage negotiations with Raguel (7:10-11).

11 Dion, Raphaël 399-413, as cited in Moore, *Tobit* 158. See also Ego, *Liebt sie 314*.

12 See Fitzmyer, *Tobit* 243; see also Fröhlich, *Tobit* 65.

13 See Hieke, *Endogamy* 109.

The Angel as Giver of Encouragement toward Good Works

Throughout the book of Tobit Raphael gives encouragement and strength to the human characters to live faithfully and fully. When Tobit and Sarah pray (3:1-15), both are discouraged, and Raphael is sent in answer to their prayer (3:16). Raphael begins his encouragement at his first meeting with Tobit. Tobit replies to his greeting, “What joy is left for me any more?” and Raphael responds to him with the double injunction, “Take courage” (*θάρσει*).¹⁴ Between the two injunctions he promises that God has healing in store for him (5:10 G^{II}). When Tobiah is afraid to marry Sarah, Raphael encourages him and promises that not only will Sarah be his wife, but that he will save her (*οὐ αὐτὴν σωσεῖς* G^{II}; 6:18). Both Tobit and Tobiah are overcome with fear when Raphael reveals his true identity (12:15-16), but Raphael responds with the typical angelic assurance, “Do not fear” (*μὴ φοβεῖσθε*; 12:17; see Matt 28:5, 10; Luke 2:10). In all these instances Raphael is encouraging the human characters to take major steps in their lives, confident in God’s care for them. In his final speech, Raphael spells out the daily good works that are also demanded of God’s faithful people: prayer, fasting, and especially almsgiving (12:8-9).

The Angel as Teacher of Prayer

Raphael is sent in answer to prayer and teaches the human characters to pray. His mission is not to fulfill the wishes of Tobit and Sarah, who have both prayed for death (3:1-15).¹⁵ Instead he restores their wish to live by teaching Tobiah how to heal them.¹⁶ In his instruction to Tobiah about the exorcism on the wedding night, he adds this to the directions concerning the fish innards: Pray together before you go to bed (6:16-18). The demon is expelled not only by foul odors but also by the power of prayer. Before his departure Raphael also exhorts Tobit and Tobiah to thank and praise God for all the good things that God has done for them (12:6). They are not only to praise God privately, but they are also to bear witness of God’s goodness before all the living (*ἐνώπιον*

¹⁴ This encouragement (*θάρσει*) occurs six times in G^{II} (5:10 twice; 7:17 twice; 8:21; 11:1) and always at critical junctures.

¹⁵ In G^I their prayer is heard in the presence of “the great Raphael” (*τοῦ μεγάλου Ραφαήλ*; 3:16).

¹⁶ Sabine van den Eynde says that, even though God doesn’t do what Tobit and Sarah ask, “the underlying need is solved”, Prayer 533.

πάντων τῶν ζώντων; 12:6 G^{II}).¹⁷ Raphael's final instruction to them is to "write down all these things that have happened to you" (12:20). Not only are they to pray and proclaim God's goodness before all people, they are also to write down the record so that God may be praised in future generations. Prayer is the driving force of the whole plot.¹⁸ In this book that is full of prayers, the great teacher of prayer is Raphael.

The Angel as "Deceiver"

Raphael seems less than honest when Tobit begins to quiz him regarding his identity (5:11-12). Tobit is concerned that a trustworthy man accompany his son so his questioning is appropriate. Raphael, however, seems to take offense: "Do you need a tribe and a family? Or are you looking for a hired man to travel with your son" (5:12 G^I). His answer when Tobit persists is: "I am Azariah, son of Hananiah the elder, one of your own kinsmen" (5:13). Is this a blatant lie? This person has been introduced to the reader as the angel Raphael (3:17; 5:4) and the narrator continues to refer to him as "Raphael" (6:11, 14, 19; 7:9; 8:2, 3; 9:1, 5; 11:1, 7)¹⁹ or "the angel" (6:3, 4, 7).²⁰ Only in chapter 12 does he acknowledge, "I am Raphael" (12:15).²¹

It is necessary to read the text on several levels in order to make sense of this apparent deceit. On a theological level, we resist the idea that angels, messengers of God, might lie. If Raphael were a human character, there would be no problem, but if angels lie, then how can any of their messages be trusted? On a literary level, the ambiguity of Raphael's identity contributes to the rich irony of the book of Tobit. The characters consistently call him "Azariah," sometimes immediately after the narrator has identified him as "Raphael" or "the angel" (6:7, 14; 7:9; 9:1-2; see also 7:1). The audience knows who he is, but the characters do not. Will Soll points out that at a sociological level the questioning provides both Tobit and Raphael "an opportunity to display [their] family values," their concern about good family origins.²² At the level of the

17 G^I adds ὑποδείκνυτε πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις to the next phrase.

18 See van den Eynde, Prayer 533.

19 So G^{II}; G^I does not name Raphael in 6:11, 14, 19; or 8:3.

20 G^I has in addition 5:6; 6:3, 4, 11, 14, 16; 8:3; 12:5.

21 Schüngel-Straumann, Tobit 110, points out that Raphael's new name, "Yahweh is my help" is "almost identical" to the name Raphael. He also identifies himself as "son of Hananiah," "Yahweh has found favor." She does not read the switching of names as deceit. Fitzmyer, Tobit 188, says that asking whether this is a lie is to miss the point since all is well at the end.

22 Soll, Family 169.

plot, it must be admitted that the freedom of the human characters to act would be compromised if they knew an angel was intimately involved in their lives. The biblical tradition also provides insight. Gideon and Manoah express the common belief that to see the “angel of the Lord face to face” brings death (Judg 6:22-23; Judg 13:21-22; see Gen 32:29, 31). Tobit and Tobiah are struck with fear when Raphael identifies himself as an angel (Tob 12:16). Other biblical angels are reluctant to reveal their names (Gen 32:30; Judg 13:17-18).²³ So angels seem regularly to take on the *persona* of a human being in order to do their work without betraying their identity.²⁴

The Angel: Present and Absent

Raphael is both present and absent. He accompanies Tobiah on the journey (6:1; 12:1) and he stands before God (12:15). But he is characterized more by absence than presence. The previous examples demonstrate that the archangel does not take over the action while human beings simply watch. Rather he teaches human beings, in this case Tobiah, how to take care of themselves. Raphael consistently disappears from the action. At the beginning of the journey, “The young man went out and the angel went with him” (6:1-2). Throughout the trip they are mentioned together in conversation. But toward the end of the journey, the reader’s focus narrows to Tobiah—“When *he* entered Media and *he* was already approaching Ecbatana”—until “Raphael said to the boy, ‘Brother Tobiah’” (6:10-11 G^l).²⁵ This is the young man’s journey; the angel is only the companion. When the two arrive at Raguel’s house, they are both involved in answering Edna’s questions until Tobiah reveals that Tobit is his father. Again the focus narrows to Tobiah and Raphael disappears from view (7:7-8).

Raphael’s disappearance from the marriage negotiations has already been mentioned (7:9-13). He reappears only to bind Asmodeus in Egypt (8:3). He goes to Rages at Tobiah’s instruction and returns with Gabael and the money (9:1-5), but when they arrive back at the feast, Tobiah greets only Gabael (9:6). Raphael has vanished again.

During the emotional farewells as Tobiah prepares to return to his family, Raphael is not mentioned (10:10-13). Only as they approach

23 Di Lella, Book 197-206, suggests that Judg 13:2-20 may have provided the ideas of Tobit 12:11-22.

24 See David Noel Freedman as quoted by Moore, Tobit n. 58, p. 25; 183, 192. Freedman sees a core of historicity in the assumed name that Moore does not.

25 G^l, Old Latin, Vulgate, and Aramaic all have a plural verb here.

Nineveh does Raphael again begin to speak, reminding Tobiah of the means by which he will bring about his father's healing (11:1-4, 7-8). As soon as they arrive, however, Raphael disappears once more. His final appearance is in chapter 12, where he gives one final instruction and reveals his identity. Then he vanishes one last time as he ascends to God (12:20-21).²⁶

The Angel: Between God and Humanity

Raphael's work is done, not at his own initiative, but solely as an agent of God. He stands before God (12:15) and he walks with human beings. He has presented the prayers of Tobit and Sarah to God (12:12) and his subsequent work is determined by God's command. Raphael is sent (*ἀπεστάλη*) by God and given a specific commission: to heal (3:17) and to test (12:14). Even though the text seems to indicate that he will be the primary actor in these dealings, in fact, he will be the mediator between God and the human characters in the story. The very meaning of his name indicates that it is God who heals, not Raphael himself. It is certainly also God who tests.²⁷

Raphael is thus both an ironic and an ambiguous character. He is an ironic character because he is more than he seems and because his identity is revealed to the audience but not to the other characters in the story. By his presence with these human characters he reveals that God is with them through their suffering, but his disguise also paradoxically reveals that God is hidden from them.

Raphael is an ambiguous character because he exhibits characteristics of a corporeal human being and of a purely spiritual being. His appearance is that of an ordinary human being and does not startle any of the other characters when they encounter him. In fact, they are quite capable of ignoring him. He speaks and issues commands with authority, but none of the characters consider his speech extraordinary. He travels and rests along with Tobiah. He consistently calls Tobiah "brother" (*ἀδελφε;* 6:11, 13 twice, 16 G^{II}). He and Tobiah bathe and wash before sitting down to dinner at Raguel's house (7:9 G^{II}; *ἐλούσαντο καὶ ἐπίψαντο*). He stays overnight with Gabael (9:5-6). Presumably he runs ahead with Tobiah (*προδρόμωμεν;* 11:3). He does not know everything:

²⁶ Compare the accounts of the angel's ascent in Judg 13:19-21 and the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1:9-11.

²⁷ The test that Raphael brings is never explicitly defined. Schüngel-Straumann identifies it as to whether Tobit will eat his Pentecost dinner first or bury the dead man (Tobit 157).

He “supposes” (*ὑπολαμβάνω*) that Tobiah and Sarah will have children (6:18 G^{II} and G^I). He plans to speak to Raguel himself about the marriage (*λαλήσω*; 6:13 G^{II} and G^I), but Tobiah takes over before he has a chance (7:9-12). He is willing to obey Tobiah (9:5). He seems to be just another man.

But he is not just another man. First of all, he knows too much. Why, when he is asked only about Media, does he specify Rages, the city Tobiah intends to visit (5:6)? Why does he mention only one particular man there (5:6)? Is Gabael the only Jew in Rages? He also mentions Ecbatana, a city known to be important by the readers but not by the characters (5:6).²⁸ Why is Tobiah not suspicious of this man who knows so much? How does Raphael/Azariah know Tobit’s instruction to Tobiah about endogamy (6:16)? Has he been eavesdropping on the conversation between Tobit and Tobiah? How does he know for sure that the wedding will happen that very night (6:16)? How does he know that Sarah has been set aside for Tobiah from eternity (6:18)?²⁹

A major question is: Does he eat? In G^I the narrator reports that “they” ate the fish (*ἔφαγον*; 6:5), whereas in G^{II} only “he” (i.e., Tobiah) eats (*ἔφαγεν*).³⁰ At Raguel’s house “they” sit down to eat (*ἀνέπεσαν δειπνῆσαι*; 7:9 G^{II}), but whether Raphael does eat is not stated. Raphael is not present at the wedding feast, since he has gone to fetch Gabael and the money (9:1-6).³¹ In chapter 12, however, Raphael states clearly, “Even though you watched me eat and drink, I did not really do so; what you were seeing was a vision” (12:19).³²

28 His information is not totally accurate, however. He declares that it is a two-day journey from Ecbatana to Rages (5:6), but it took Alexander’s army eleven days of forced march to cover the almost two hundred miles. See Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* 3.20. The discrepancy reveals the author’s lack of knowledge, but at the level of the story it is suggestive of Raphael’s angelic character and abilities, especially since he traveled with four servants from Ecbatana to Rages, collected the money, and brought Gabael back to the wedding celebration within the fourteen days of the celebration (9:2-6; see 8:20!).

29 This last piece of information is confirmed by Raguel (7:12). How does he know? See Schüngel-Straumann, *Tobit* 121-122, 127.

30 Ms W of the Old Latin also has the plural verb for “eat,” but both Aramaic texts have the singular. The phrase does not occur in the other manuscripts of the Old Latin or in the Vulgate. See Fitzmyer, *Tobit* 207. Moore, *Tobit* 200 says the singular is to be preferred because of the Aramaic witness and because of 12:19.

31 Schüngel-Straumann, *Tobit* 160 implies that Raphael has arranged his absence deliberately. Jacobs, *Dinner* 131-132, suggests that Raphael’s not eating indicates that “he has not become entangled with earthly matters.”

32 G^{II} says only “not eat” (*οὐκ ἔφαγον οὐθὲν*), but G^I says “neither eat nor drink” (*οὐκ ἔφαγον οὐδὲ ἔπιον*). The Aramaic 4Q196 has “I did not drink”; the Vulgate says, “I use invisible food and a drink that cannot be seen by humans” (Fitzmyer, *Tobit* 297-98).

If the narrator's statements that imply Raphael ate are simply reports of the other characters' perceptions, is one to conclude that the statements that he bathed and visited and walked and ran also based on visions? Is the narrator also deceiving us? Or is Raphael's hiddenness a sign of God's compassion for human weakness?

Raphael: Revelation of God's Hidden Presence and Work

The angel Raphael came to Nineveh to work. He acts primarily as messenger and teacher: informing Tobiah about the medical and magical properties of the fish, instructing him about his obligation to marry Sarah, exhorting Tobit and Tobiah to give praise to God, and telling them to write the story of God's goodness to them. He is also a guide and protector, helping Tobiah "conquer" the threatening fish and exorcise the dangerous demon and guiding Tobiah and Sarah on their journey. Thus he is often compared to the Christian idea of the guardian angel. While there are some similarities, there is one major difference: Raphael's relationship to Tobiah is, according to the story, only temporary but ordinarily guardian angels are understood to accompany people throughout life. Raphael is also a strong support to Tobiah and Tobit, encouraging them to take the necessary risks to lead rich and faithful lives. He truly gives them heart.

Throughout the story Raphael is both a mysterious and an ironic character. He is more than he seems and, until the end, he does not allow the human characters to see his full identity. Thus he appears on occasion to be deceitful when in actuality he simply is telling less than the full truth. He is a bridge between God and humanity and, in order to give the human characters their freedom, sometimes disappears from the action.

In the last analysis, we too, contemplating God's ongoing gift of messengers to us, are led with Tobit and Tobiah to give thanks and acknowledge the wonderful works God still does when the angels of God come among us (see 12:22).

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